

A New Approach to the Study of Minstrelsy

Varró, Gabriella. *Signifying in Blackface: The Pursuit of Minstrel Signs in American Literature*. Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 2008. 238 pp.

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In the book version of her dissertation, Dr. Gabriella Varró provides the reader not only with valuable critical insights into the genre of minstrelsy and the cultural survival of minstrel signs but also shows that theory is not simply an “arbitrary exercise, but indeed should be put to practical uses” (5). Why and how did the cultural heritage of minstrelsy outlive its original cultural context? How can its signs be identified and interpreted in contemporary and later literary works? How can these cultural codes be understood in and translated into “foreign” cultural contexts? In the process of answering these questions the author also presents a general critical method with which one can pursue and discover the survival and presence of various other cultural signs in literary works. With the description of a new type of methodology the author lays the foundation for other critical studies while also touching upon issues of a more general interest in the field of American Studies.

I was first introduced to minstrelsy as a student of the author several years ago and it was fascinating to read a detailed study now as a colleague. The style of the author and the focus of the present study make this area of research attractive both for students looking for information on the history and characteristics of minstrelsy as well as for scholars interested in a novel form of analysis. Dr. Gabriella Varró, currently Assistant Professor of the Institute of English and American Studies at the University of Debrecen, has already published book length studies and essays in the field, investigating minstrelsy criticism and the presence of minstrel signs in the works of Mark Twain, Herman Melville and John

Berryman. The present work complements and builds upon her earlier writings and successfully fulfills a dual objective: it supplies “the outlines of a new theory by producing the semiotics of blackface minstrelsy” and applies “this semiotic framework as a critical tool in the analysis of selected texts from American literature” (5). Throughout the book the author emphasizes the interrelationship between the study of popular culture, popular theatre and that of its historical, social and cultural context, making the work a study of an age and not only that of a genre.

In order to provide a basis for fulfilling the goals of the dissertation Chapter I specifies the theoretical background of the study building on two critical traditions, minstrelsy studies and theatre and drama semiotics. However, the section moves beyond simple theoretical investigation and emphasizes the practical use of such critical analysis. The focus of this use is to prepare cultural consumers for the reception of minstrel icons and in order to do this to define and classify the minstrel sign. The writer identifies five semiotic classes of minstrel signs (structural, literary or generic, aesthetic, linguistic and bodily or physical) and lists numerous individual signs within these blocks.

Based on the previous section, Chapter II presents the most significant and characteristic signs of each category. This is essential in order to help readers in identifying and understanding minstrel signs in different cultural contexts (that may be foreign to them either because they encounter these signs in a completely different genre or because the signs have lost their “active denotative (as well as connotative) sign functions over time” (12)). This type of classification might facilitate the translation of these cultural signs in any context they might appear in. As I have already mentioned before, the book and the analysis presented in it can prove to be useful not only for scholars interested in a detailed study of a special aspect of minstrelsy but also for students looking for an introduction to the genre. Chapter II (together with other parts discussing the relevant terminology) could very well serve the aims of the latter group (as well as those of their professors). The description of the different categories and the numerous individual signs belonging to them (the street parade, semicircular stage format, minstrel songs, jokes, clichés, etc.) could be used as part of a course dealing with popular culture in the United States in general or with the cultural heritage of minstrelsy in particular.

Chapter III, “Commodification of the Minstrel Sign”, offers an interesting analysis of the commercialization of minstrelsy. This chapter

presents it perfectly how popular theatre cannot be separated from its historical, cultural and economic context and through her analysis the author provides us with valuable insights into the ideological and racial processes of the era. The chapter highlights those factors that resulted in the rise and proliferation of minstrelsy as an institution, a commercial enterprise and those processes that contributed to the spreading of minstrel signs. The chapter investigates the “product” and “examines the rhetorical, marketing and promotional strategies that contributed to the popularization of this new ‘produce’ as well as assisted the promulgation of minstrel signs in the larger culture” (103). Although it may be said about other sections of the work as well, the fact that the dissertation is very thoroughly researched can be witnessed here perfectly: the author considers historical events and tendencies, facts coming from various documents, playbills and files in presenting her analysis.

The following two chapters study minstrelsy’s influence on “high literature” both in its own time, the 19th century (Chapter IV) and during the 20th century (Chapter V) in various forms. The presented analysis of the selected works (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, “Benito Cereno”, *Confidence-Man*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Invisible Man*, *Dream Songs, spell #7*) shows that the cultural signs of minstrelsy are not only transplanted into high literature but they “retain their meanings even when removed from their original contexts” (140). While focusing on the selected writings the chapters also point to and lay the foundations of further research by offering this critical tool in reading and interpreting other literary texts.

Besides specific minstrelsy related topics detailed in the chapters introduced above, the writer touches upon issues that are of primary importance in the field of American Studies in general, particularly in the field of American Studies in (Central) Europe. Scholars working in Central Europe and studying the culture of the United States can always feel to be outsiders to a certain extent and many formulate similar ideas as the author of this book who claims that she “was very much aware of [her] precarious position as an outsider of the field, being both white and European” (1). In many cases this feeling is coupled with an often heard and experienced concern that our research and findings are rarely discussed in the United States while at home they are read mostly by those working in the same or similar area of research. This does not mean that the studies published in this region would not provide new insights into US culture or would not be interesting for a more general public in

Hungary for example. This book, among several others, proves that “outsiders” can certainly contribute to the field of American Studies and could also appeal to a broader audience if certain changes were initiated (e.g. the studies would be available in Hungarian as well).

This outside position of scholars should be seen not as a hindering force but rather as a position that can provide them with a unique view that is more receptive to various aspects of American Studies and the changes involved in its development through time than native authors. With an international approach, aspects of cultural texts not visible for native people could come to the surface and could reveal new knowledge about American culture. As a result of the need to translate culture into a new context, as in the case of understanding minstrel signs and symbols in Hungary, a new system can be developed that could be useful for American “cultural consumers” as well, who need a type of decoding assistance not because of cultural or geographical distances but simply because the meaning of certain cultural signs is not obvious any more when reemerging in a different time period or context. It is in this respect, in providing assistance for decoding minstrel signs in various other texts, that the present book offers a new approach towards American Studies and opens up new possibilities for reaching readers of a broader spectrum. As it is emphasized by the author throughout the study, this investigation into the cultural survival of minstrel signs is only one possible focus of research and a similar approach could result in opening up new layers of meaning in well known texts, members of “high literature” or could make the understanding of references in popular culture (television, movies, advertising, etc.) easier.

A major task of scholars working in the field of American Studies in Central Europe, and Hungary in particular, would be to let their findings be known for more people, even for those who do not speak English or are not interested in scholarship in general. A major step in this process would be to publish more books and studies in Hungarian, this way contributing to the “great mission of cultural translation” (that the author discusses in detail in the “Afterword”) and changing the very often negative (and widely misunderstood) image of the United States of America. In order to understand cultural texts it is not enough to understand the language of a foreign culture but one also needs to learn about a “cultural alphabet” in order to decode the numerous levels of meaning in literature and popular culture. Dr. Varró offers one possible approach to provide readers with such a cultural alphabet by presenting

the semiotic system of minstrelsy. Now it is the task of other scholars to take these or other techniques and explore the cultural alphabet of other areas presenting special aspects of the American experience and share it with cultural consumers who may be at a great distance from the original work both geographically and culturally.

The book version of Dr. Gabriella Varró's dissertation, *Signifying in Blackface: The Pursuit of Minstrel Signs in American Literature*, offers new critical insights into the study of minstrelsy and fulfils its aim of presenting more than just arbitrary theoretical formulations. It produces a practical use of theory in decoding signs of minstrelsy in foreign contexts and also contributes to the debate over the translatability of cultures. It is just as important that the author points to possibilities of further research by establishing the basis of a new type of critical analysis. For all these reasons I would recommend this book to scholars and students alike who would like to gain new insights into the world of minstrelsy as well as into its influence on high culture.